
“Hero Worship”

by Eugene V. Debs

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The *Railway Service Gazette* in a recent issue has an article with the above caption — “Hero Worship” — and opens its batteries as follows:

The railway service is not altogether free from that form of lunacy known as hero worship. It has several lines shown itself in the setting up of a base image as an officer of some of the employees' associations and the kneeling down of members of the particular association represented and the groveling in the dust and worshipping at his feet. Some of these images have been shattered. Others are still posing before the public, but they will be shattered.

It would seem from the foregoing that it is not “hero worship,” after all, that “the railway service” is engaged in, but a sort of an “image” worship — an “image of an officer” or an employee, hence not “hero worship,” but idol worship. It occurs to us that there is a vast difference.

It would seem proper in this connection to have a correct conception of the term “worship.” We presume our esteemed contemporary uses the term metaphorically. We do not suppose that members of any association “kneel down” in the dust at the feet of an officer and worship him. We take it that is hyperbole. But, if there are those who do such things, then it is a *fact* and not “a fallacy.” Not “a delusion,” not “an idle dream.”

Our esteemed contemporary says there are “heroes in the world,” true heroes, noble heroes. We are told that we are meeting them constantly in the streets, so frequently indeed, that we do not so much as dream “that they are heroes.” This leads us to inquire, what constitutes a hero?

Webster says: "a hero is a man of distinguished valor;" but our lexicographers have so many grades of heroes, that the term "hero" has lost much of its significance. We have heroes in the "prize ring," at all the various modern tournaments (?). baseball, football, cricket, boat races, billiards, etc., etc., to the end of the chapter; the woods are full of them, all heroes according to modern estimates. In fact, we have revived the "Heroic Age." Some people believe that Chauncey Mephistopheles Depew is a hero, not an image, not a thing of wood, nor of clay, but of brass and brains, with legs and arms and eyes and ears, a Vanderbilt god who gets \$50,000 a year — an oracle, who, when he has on his blouse and overalls, and speaks for labor, is received with the "wildest kind of cheers." And there is H. Walter Webb, another Vanderbilt *deity*, who inhabits the same temple that glows with the presence of *god* Depew, a fighting *god* whom the Pinkertons worship, the *god* that distributes the guns and ammunition and makes Knights of Labor get up and hustle, or be caressed into quietude by a bullet. Are we dreaming? are we nursing a fallacy? Nay, verily we can almost bear the resounding shouts, the deep-toned thunder of the cheers as *god* Mephistopheles Depew, the labor god, steps to the front, waves his hand and squirts his liquid taffy with perfect abandon over P. M. Arthur.

He spoke, and bowed. With muttering jaws
The wondering circle grinn'd applause, ¹

Yes, we guess our esteemed contemporary must be right, that such railroad "employees" as Depew are worshiped, but it is not a "fallacy," a "dream," an hallucination, a vagary, but a fact.

These heroes, it will be noticed, are not "wooden images." They are not images. They are flesh and blood, and the same may be said of a groundhog. The mistake is, they are not heroes, they are not men of distinguished valor. Now then, in the "railway service" there are both officers and employees who have the "distinguished valor" to look with proud contempt upon pseudo-heroes. They have the courage to denounce with unmitigated scorn, men who seek to establish an aristocracy of labor — an aristocracy predicated upon the difference between \$2 and \$4 a day, a \$2 a day aristocracy. It is such an aristocracy that Chauncey M. Depew would have locomotive engineers cultivate,

¹ Couplet from the poetic fable "The Monkey Who Had Seen the World," by **John Gay** (1685-1732).

but the engineers should remember that this labor leader, this labor agitator, this walking delegate, receives more for his *work* one day than they receive in 30 days.

But returning to the question, who are real heroes? Not that they may be worshiped, but that their heroism may receive its just meed of praise and admiration. It is not difficult to estimate exhibitions of physical courage. Not long since, two gold medals were awarded two heroes by the government for saving life at the peril of their own. But after all, are there not instances of moral courage, as justly entitled to applause?

See you that man? He is at the head of a great labor organization. He loves his fellow man. He has witnessed his oppression and his degradation. The sight has aroused him, fired his soul. He speaks, he works for the deliverance of his fellow toilers. He would not abate his energies to relieve them a milligram for an ocean of Depew's taffy, nor for the wealth of the Vanderbilts. He would rather die as poor as a Lazarus, with only vagabond dogs as his nurses, than accept the millionth part of a mill for the applause of the enemies of labor and the luxuries of a Vanderbilt. He is a hero. We do not worship him, we simply admire him and it is a privilege to praise him.

Again, we impersonate a brotherhood for illustration: The CB&Q strike was brought about by the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. Did the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen in that fight, exhibit "distinguished valor?" It entered into an alliance with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. It stood by them. The men saw their situations go. They peered into the future and saw desolation coming, they saw themselves wanderers looking for work, they saw separation between father and family inevitable, they saw poverty and destitution. Did they quail? Did they murmur? Did the membership hesitate to pay? Let the figures tell. We like that sort of heroism amazingly. It is the sort that will emancipate labor, if the victory is ever to come.

As we write we have in our mind's eye a man earning a large salary. He needs it. He is not rich in shekels. He can go on, take his salary, and be quiet. No, he sees a large body of men with whom he has been actively identified, oppressed, wronged, degraded. He resolves to find a remedy and apply it. He gives up his comfortable and lucrative position. He proclaims his purpose. He goes forth on his mission. He plants the seed of a new brotherhood, and, as if by magic, it comes forth equipped for the fray. It grows in numbers, in force and in in-

fluence. It sounds the keynote of protection and federation. What of it? George W. Howard is the Grand Chief of the Brotherhood of Railway Conductors. Is he not a man of distinguished moral courage? We admire his zeal, his integrity, and his noble work is winning applause.

Again, there is a heroism of integrity when assailed by temptation, that will not yield, that stands and withstands.

See you that man? He is the financier of his lodge, the custodian of its funds. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, in his hands. His lodge is in easy distance of the Canadian boundary. Did temptation ever assail that man? It has attacked others and they fell. We do not know. This we know, his hand is a burglar proof safe. Bonds to the winds. He would rather pluck out his heart and feed it to the crows than to part dishonestly with a farthing. He is a hero. Put him anywhere and he will fight for the right. We will not worship such a hero, but we will applaud, and where rests his dust is sacred ground.

Upon his brow shame is ashamed to sit,
For 'tis a throne where honor may be crowned,
Sole monarch of the universal earth.²

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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² From *Romeo and Juliet*, act 3, scene 2, by **William Shakespeare** (1564-1616).